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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1964
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000122

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, INR AND S/CT
DEPT PLEASE PASS PEACE CORPS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [BD](#)

SUBJECT: GOB'S CHIEF IMAM APPOINTMENT RUFFLES FEATHERS

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) An early challenge to the Awami League government from its religio-cultural as well as political opposition led to a security force crack-down at Dhaka's central mosque January 30. The move came after protesters objecting to the January 1 appointment of a new khatib (chief imam) at the national mosque participated in violent scuffles during successive Friday prayers beginning January 9. Some protesting the new appointment appear to be neo-fundamentalist radicals alleging the new khatib is the disciple of a 'pir' (a holy man - and therefore a practitioner of the syncretic form of Islam peculiar to South Asia often criticized by neo-fundamentalists). The government charges that protesters are a small, politically-motivated group looking to discredit the new government and seeking a share of the considerable perks the khatib enjoys. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue, the government's resorting to force and its failure to reach out and dialogue with protesters is a disappointment at a time when many had hoped the new ruling party would make an effort to accord meaningful space to its opposition. End summary.

DEATH OF A KHATIB

12. (U) The death of the national mosque's previous khatib (who had been in office for almost two decades) occurred in October 2007. Following his death, another of the mosque's imams, Mohammed Nuruddin, served as acting khatib. On January 1, the outgoing caretaker government (CTG) appointed Mohamed Salaudinn as the new khatib, characterizing him as a respected religious figure who had been principal of Dhaka's largest government-sponsored madrasa and khatib for another large Dhaka mosque.

13. (U) Scuffles among shoe-wielding worshippers erupted at the mosque January 9, when supporters who considered Nuruddin the better candidate clashed with supporters of the new appointee, Salaudinn. Similar clashes occurred Friday, January 16 and Friday, January 23. On January 28, the new Awami League government announced it backed the CTG choice of khatib and would not tolerate further disorder at the national mosque. "Tough actions will be taken against the troublemakers if they try to create unrest," announced the State Minister for Home Affairs.

WHY NOT SALAUDDIN?

14. (SBU) Although several groups with different interests

were apparently involved in the protests, the main anti-Salauddin factions appear to be two small Islamist parties:

-- Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), member of the BNP-led four-party alliance. It won a single parliamentary seat as part of that alliance in the 2001 election, but failed to secure any seats in the 2008 elections. Its leader, Fadlul Haq Al Amini, is considered a radical neo-fundamentalist firebrand. He allegedly mobilized some Dhaka area madrasa students to protest Salauddin's appointment on successive Fridays, on the grounds that Saluddin is "a controversial figure." Among the points of controversy are reports that Salauddin is a disciple of the 'pir' (holy man) of Atroshi. (Note: The institution of pir is central to Bangladesh's indigenous Sufi-based mainstream form of Islam and some of Bangladesh's various neo-fundamentalist groups criticize this institution as un-Islamic. Although there are many thousands of pirs in Bangladesh, the pir of Atroshi is one of perhaps a dozen prominent pirs. End note.)

-- Islami Andolon Bangladeshi (IAB), a small Islamist political party headed by another prominent pir - the pir of Charmonai. Although it failed to win any seats in the 2008 elections, IAB fielded 167 candidates (out of a possible 300) nationwide and managed to capture 1 percent of the overall national vote. IAB issued a press release January 26 impugning Salauddin's religious credentials and calling for his resignation. (Note: Since pirs all claim to be God's true representative on earth, they are in strong natural competition with each other. In this case, the pir of Charmonai would be against the pir of Atroshi benefiting, through his disciple, from the khatib's considerable perks

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and influence. End note.)

THE GOVERNMENT: IT'S ALL ABOUT POLITICS AND MONEY

15. (SBU) The small group of protesters are attempting to score politically against the new Awami League government, according to Shamim Mohammed Afzal, Director General of the Islamic Foundation, which oversees the khatib appointment process for the national mosque. During a January 29 meeting with Poloff, Afzal opined that another motive is the considerable financial and other benefits the khatib enjoys, both officially from the government and informally from worshippers. He strongly defended the appointment of Salauddin, whom he lauded as a respected and capable religious figure. He rejected suggestions floated in the media that the government should form a rotating panel of khatibs, or engage in dialogue with dissenters on the process. "The procedure was followed correctly and this is the correct choice," he said, adding that the protests would eventually die down and disappear.

...AND FORCE

16. (U) Embassy contacts said prayers took place peacefully January 30 after the prominent deployment of "several hundred" uniformed and plain-clothes police and members of the para-military Rapid Action Battalion at the national mosque. One Embassy contact opined that "eighty percent of the ones praying were policemen." Security forces reportedly searched worshippers prior to mosque entry and, according to press reports, "drove away" a group of madrasa students attempting to stage a protest in front of the national mosque.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Whatever the rights and wrongs of this murky and complex issue, the government's resorting to force and its

failure to engage with the protesters is a disappointment. Many here hope the new government will make an effort to accord meaningful space to those who oppose it -- not just politically, but religiously and culturally as well -- but this is not an auspicious beginning.

MORIARTY